IMPROVISED EUROPEANS:
American Literary Expatriates and the Siege of London.
By Alex Zwerdling. Basic.
425 pp. $35

Europe barely registers on our cultural radar these days, but there was a time when it would have filled the entire screen. Politically and culturally, the United States spent the 19th century in Europe's shadow. To England especially, America was the boisterous, untutored rebel, the offspring perceived as something of an embarrassment. But by the early 20th century, the upstart had become mighty, a cultural achiever in its own right, and the imperial parent was tottering.

Zwerdling, a professor of English at Berkeley, portrays this grand reversal through the personal encounters with England and the Continent of four great figures in American literary life—Henry Adams, Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot. The four fall into two roughly contemporaneous pairs, and their collective lives extend from the first half of the 19th century to the second half of the 20th. The concatenation is striking: Adams and James were friends; late in his life, James knew Pound; Pound was a friend and creative adviser to the young Eliot.

James M. Barrie (left) and Henry James in London, 1910

Derived from a letter of Adams to James, the term "improvised Europeans" is used to characterize a particular type of mid-19th-century American, "molded by Boston, Harvard, and Unitarianism," and "brought up in irritable dislike of America." Zwerdling employs the term in a more expansive sense for his literary expatriates, who felt compelled to come to terms with themselves, their talents, and their ambitions by moving to Europe. Adams was mature when he lived for a time in Paris and London, but the others were young when they went abroad and had their imaginations fired by the Old World.

We forget how young. We remember Pound as the remote and deranged old man who had favored the Fascists, not as a product of Idaho and Hamilton College and the University of Pennsylvania. James and Eliot linger in our minds as they were in their seniority, grave, oracular, marmoreal. But all three were still in their twenties when their work began to win critical attention. Eliot published "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" at 27 and "The Waste Land" at 34, after it had been revised and shaped by the barely older Pound. In his mid-thirties James wrote *The American*, *The Europeans*, and *Daisy Miller*.

They all aspired to separation from their American origins and association with the superior European culture. They wanted to be placeless cosmopolites who could move with facility among the literatures and traditions of the world, their work free of mere national affiliation. "The birth of Anglo-American modernism as a self-conscious movement," writes Zwerdling, "owes a great deal to the overlap (and the shared assumptions) of these displaced Americans."

But they achieved their cosmopolitanism at a price. The youthful genius released by immersion in the foreign yielded eventually to regret. The recovery of their origins and of what they had forgone became for them "a necessary act of self-possession." What Zwerdling says of James hints at the common loss: "As he reflects on his own life and those of artists who have made similar choices, he becomes aware that the dream of his youth—to write about, and for, a cosmopolitan world in which the issue of his national identity is unproblematic—has not been realized. He has had to settle for less, much less."

Zwerdling mixes social and cultural history, literary criticism, and biography in expert measure to construct an absorbing narrative of these divided lives. He draws on the major published works as well as on letters and

journals and unpublished materials, and he is always agile in controlling the disparate sources. When he turns to the human consequences of his characters' decisions to stand apart, the book even manages an effect rarely associated with academic criticism these days: it becomes moving.

—James M. Morris

WILL THIS DO?: An Autobiography.

By Auberon Waugh. Carroll & Graf. 288 pp. $24

Each week in London's *Spectator* and *Sunday Telegraph*, 59-year-old Auberon Waugh writes battle dispatches from the losing side of the class war, praising such vanishing upper-class folkways as fox hunting, ethnic slurs, and drunk driving. The author of five novels, he appears frequently as a television pundit, edits the monthly *Literary Review*, and writes regularly on wine. But his own writing has not proved a vintage that travels well. While Waugh is among the best-known right-wing men of letters in Britain, foreigners know him, if at all, only as the eldest son of novelist Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966).

"Being the son of Evelyn Waugh was a considerable advantage in life," Waugh notes, with some overstatement. For all of Evelyn's friends who helped Auberon (John Betjeman, Graham Greene), there were plenty of others who stood in his way (Anthony Powell, Cyril Connolly). Evelyn himself had little interest in family life, taking meals alone in the library when his children were home from boarding school, and, "with undisguised glee," holding lavish parties to celebrate their departures. When rationing was lifted just after World War II, the government promised every child in Britain a banana—a legendary treat. Neither Auberon nor his two sisters had ever eaten one. On the evening the three bananas arrived, his mother placed all of them before Evelyn, who wolfed them down with cream and (heavily rationed) sugar. "From that moment," Auberon writes, "I never treated anything he had to say on faith or morals very seriously."

Other than the occasional adventure (serving with the Royal Horse Guards in Cyprus, he mishandled a machine gun and shot himself six times), this autobiography largely chronicles Waugh's free-lance assignments in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. It is sometimes enlivened by blow-by-blow accounts of libel suits and literary feuds, and there are humorous moments. Invited to Senegal to speak on breast-feeding, Waugh discovers after weeks of research that the invitation had been misheard; the subject of his talk was to be not breast-feeding but press freedom. Because the speech was to be in French, Waugh could not even describe the misunderstanding to his audience, "since '*la liberté de la Presse*' bears no resemblance to '*le nourrisson naturel des bébés*.'"

Slapped together out of the 1991 English edition, the book is full of anachronisms—not just dead people referred to in the present tense, but thematic anachronisms as well. Here, as in his columns, the British class system obsesses Waugh. *Will This Do?* catalogues, ad nauseam, his and his friends' houses and pedigrees, and laments the shiftiness of the working classes. The near-decade since the book first appeared has seen the rise of televised politics and the collapse of the Tory Party, changes that have corroded the class system in ways no workers' party could ever have dreamed of. The world Waugh lovingly chronicles here not only holds little appeal for the American reader; it's of waning relevance in Britain too.

—Christopher Caldwell

THE DREAMS OUR STUFF IS MADE OF: How Science Fiction Conquered the World.

By Thomas M. Disch. Free Press. 272 pp. $25

In the late 1960s, science fiction was divided into two warring camps. The Old Wave wanted the genre to continue following the traditions established by Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Arthur C. Clarke, depicting scientific advances and their human consequences. The New Wave, by contrast, wanted SF (which they maintained stood for "speculative fiction") to raise its standards and aspire to become avant-garde literature. The Old Wave stressed *science*; the New Wave stressed *fiction*.

Thirty years later, it's hard to tell who won. The best writers—such as Gregory Benford, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Stephen Baxter—produce high-quality fiction that's scientifically accurate, satisfying